

# 1

It was a very lazy, sunshiny early summer afternoon, and I was sitting on the board seat of the big swing under the walnut tree, thinking more or less about nothing. I never dreamed that, before the week would pass, I'd be head over heels in the middle of the red shoe mystery.

My reddish brown mustached father had just climbed down our new extension ladder, which had the Collins name painted on it. He'd been checking the top of the swing to see how safe it was, and he said, "Well, Son, you don't need to worry. Everything up there is all right. Just don't let the whole Sugar Creek Gang swing on it at one time."

He took the ladder down, slid the two sections of it together, and carried it toward our truck, which at the time was standing in the shade of the plum tree near the iron pitcher pump. There he lifted that ladder as if it was made of feathers instead of aluminum and laid it in the back of the truck. He was very proud either of our new ladder or of his powerful biceps. I couldn't tell which.

He climbed into the truck's cab then, started the motor, and began to drive toward the gate that leads out onto the gravel road.

"Where you going with that ladder?" I

called to him. He was just driving past the mailbox that had “Theodore Collins” painted on it when he called back to me, “One of our neighbors wants to borrow it for a few days.”

With that, he was off down the road, a cloud of white dust following him.

I stood up on the board seat of the swing and pumped myself one- or two-dozen times and then sat down to coast, enjoying the feel of the wind in my face and the flapping of my shirt sleeves. Swinging like that gives a boy one of the finest feelings he can have—even if he hardly ever gets to have it very long if his folks are at home.

In fact, that very second Mom called from the east window of our house for me to come and help her with a little woman’s work. She wanted the house to have a good cleaning before she left for Memory City tomorrow to spend a week at my cousin Wally’s house.

It was while I was dusting the lower shelf of our lamp table that I noticed the birthday book in which Mom keeps a record of all the names and birthday dates of people she sends cards to every year. Just out of curiosity, I leafed through to see whose birthday would be coming soon and gasped in surprise when I saw Mom’s own name. Then I remembered her birthday was next Saturday, the day she would be coming home from Memory City.

That meant I’d better set my brain to working and think of something nice to get for her—something extra special.

Mom must have heard me gasp, because she looked up from the kitchen floor where she was spreading wax on the linoleum and said through the open door, “Anything wrong?”

I started whisking my dustcloth a little faster and whistling and hardly bothered to answer, saying with a half yawn, “Oh, nothing. Just something I thought of.” And I watched for a chance to put the book back where it had been.

Anyway, it was while I was on my way Saturday afternoon to get a birthday present for Mom that Poetry and I stumbled onto the mystery—the red shoe mystery, that is.

The very special entirely different kind of gift I had decided on was up in the hills not far from Old Man Paddler’s cabin. We were trudging happily along when what to my wondering eyes should appear but somebody’s red leather slip-on shoe lying in the mud at the edge of the muskrat pond.

That spring-fed pond, as you may already know, is about halfway through the swamp. The sycamore tree and the mouth of the cave are at one end, and the woods near Old Man Paddler’s clapboard-roofed log cabin are at the other end.

Even from as far away from the shoe as I was at the time, which was about thirty feet, I could tell it wasn’t anybody’s old worn-out, thrown-away shoe. It looked almost new, as if it had been worn hardly at all. It had a low heel and was the kind and size a teenage girl might wear.

I was so surprised at what I was seeing that I stopped and stood stock-still, and Poetry, who was walking behind my red wagon in the path, bumped into it with his shins.

For a few seconds, Poetry staggered around trying to regain his lost balance. Then he lost it completely, upsetting the wagon at the same time, and scrambled, rolled, and slid down the slope toward the pond's muddy bank. And also toward the red shoe.

"What on earth!" his ducklike voice managed to squawk at me. "Why don't you let me know when you're going to slam on your brakes like—"

"Look!" I exclaimed. "Right behind you at the edge of the pond! There's a red shoe. There's been a murder or a kidnapping around here somewhere!"

As soon as I said that, I began to think that probably that was what actually had happened. Somebody had kidnapped a girl and was taking her along the path through the swamp—maybe to the haunted house far up in the hills above Old Man Paddler's cabin. When they stopped here to rest a few minutes, the girl had broken away from him and started to run. She had stumbled over something, maybe her own feet, had fallen, and, like Poetry, had rolled down the slope. Her shoe had gotten stuck in the mud and slipped off when she tried to pull it out. But she had kept on running.

I suppose one reason my imagination was running away like that was because the swamp

was a very eerie place, even in the daytime. That spongy, tree-shaded, sometimes-flooded tract was where the six members of the Sugar Creek Gang had had quite a few exciting and dangerous adventures in the past.

I never will forget the dark night Big Jim's flashlight spotted old hook-nosed John Till's head lying out in the quicksand about thirty feet from the high path we were always careful to stay on when we were going through. That is, we *thought* it was his head lying there but found out a split second later that the rest of him was fastened to it. Somehow he had gotten off the only path there is and had been sucked all the way up to his chin in the mire.

That was a feverish time, I tell you. His calls for help and his scared eyes in the light of the flashlight were enough to make any boy's hair stand on end.

And it was in this very swamp that Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang, had first seen a fierce mother bear wallowing in the mud on a hot summer day the way hogs do in a barnyard wallowing place.

One of our most nerve-tingling experiences happened right here at this muskrat pond when my cousin Wally's copper-colored mongrel, Alexander the Coppersmith, had a fierce under-the-surface battle with a snapping turtle—the biggest turtle there ever was in the Sugar Creek territory.

So, with these adventures in the history section of my mind, it was easy for me to imagine a

screaming girl's frantic struggle with a fierce-faced kidnapper, maybe on the grassy mound I myself was on right that second.

With my mind's eye I could see her wrestle herself out of his clutches, stumble, and roll down the bank, where her shoe came off in the mud. She didn't dare stop to get it and put it back on but kept running on through the swamp to the woods and on to Old Man Paddler's cabin or in the other direction to the sycamore tree and the cave.

That was as far as I got to think along that kind of scary line, because Poetry, who had picked up the shoe and had a different feeling about it than I did, started to quote one of the hundred and one poems he knew by heart:

“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;  
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;  
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.”

I'd memorized that poem myself when I was in the fourth grade.

There were quite a few things in our school readers that were supposed to teach us things that were good for a boy to know. This one taught us how important little things could be. If the horse's owner had noticed when the horseshoe had lost a nail and had a new nail put in, the horse wouldn't have lost the shoe and wouldn't have gone lame and stumbled and fallen, and the rider wouldn't have gotten killed. A boy ought to be careful about little

things such as having his mother sew up the small torn places in his shirt and not dropping lighted matches anywhere.

That lost-and-found shoe wasn't very large, but it could be a very important clue. "Be careful!" I called down the knoll to Poetry. "Don't wipe off or smudge up any fingerprints!"

"Who cares about fingerprints?" he called back. "Come on down and take a look at these *footprints!*"

I left my upset wagon where it was and clambered backwards to where Poetry was. "What footprints? Where?" I asked him, not seeing anybody's tracks.

"Right there!" he said. "At the edge of the water!"

I looked again and saw what he was stooped over and pointing at with his right forefinger. "That," I objected, "is a muskrat's track!"

I was looking at a three-inch-long, web-footed track—several of them, in fact—at the water's edge, and I knew that the webbed tracks had been made by the hind feet of one of the cutest wild animals there is in the Sugar Creek territory, a chuckle-headed, beady-eyed, stocky-bodied, nearly naked-tailed rodent.

Next, my eyes searched all along the bank of the pond where we'd found the red shoe. I saw only muskrat tracks—not one single human being's tracks anywhere.

"I guess we have stumbled onto a mystery," Poetry was willing to admit. Then he yawned, as if it wasn't too important, and, handing the

red leather shoe to me, he added, "Let's get going. We have to get the tree dug and balled and back and set out before your folks get home."

Now my mind was divided. An hour ago, when we'd started from home, pulling my red wagon along, it seemed I was on the way to do one of the most important things a boy could do—plan a big birthday surprise for his mother.

In fact, Dad and I had planned it together and had managed to keep it a secret for a whole week. It had been easy to keep the secret that long because Mom had been away from home that long. And when she would get back to the Collins place late this afternoon, the surprise would be waiting for her in the backyard just outside the dining room window.

The cute little two-foot-high blue spruce tree Poetry and I were on our way up to Old Man Paddler's to get would be standing green and straight and proud halfway between the two cherry trees at the end of the row of hollyhocks that grew along our orchard fence. Would my wonderful mother ever be pleased!

That's why Poetry and I were taking the path through the swamp instead of the shortcut through the cave. The cave actually comes out in the old man's cellar, but we never could have pulled the wagon through the cave.

As I said, my mind was divided. I had a birthday surprise to hurry up and get for Mom, and maybe I had a kidnap mystery to solve. Somebody somewhere—maybe close by—needed a boy's help.



“How,” I demanded of Poetry, as if he knew and didn’t want to tell me, “how in the world did the shoe get *here*? There isn’t a human being’s tracks anywhere except ours!”

“It fell here, of course. How else?”

“From where?” I asked and looked up at the overhanging branches of a big elm. “Shoes don’t grow on trees!”

“All right,” he said loftily. “I’ll get going on the mystery myself. Somebody’s got to solve it, and it may just as well be the best detective in the whole county.”

He meant himself, Leslie Thompson, which, even though I knew he was joking, was almost the truth. His mind was always ferreting out the answer to some knotty problem.

“First things first, though,” Detective Thompson began, and the tone of his ducklike voice told me he had taken charge of the mystery and I was to take orders from him from now on. “You carry the shoe. I’ll pull the wagon this time, and you follow behind. Keep your eyes peeled for anything suspicious such as a red dress with a girl in it and another red shoe with a girl’s foot in it.”

Of course, Poetry was right about our needing to get going. We had to get going to get done what we had to do, shoe or no shoe, girl or no girl.

Even though in a few minutes we were quite a way from where we had found the red shoe and were hurrying along on the winding narrow path, leaving the pond behind, my

mind was still back where it had been. Who, maybe last night, maybe early this morning, maybe only a few hours ago, had been in such a hurry that she had lost a shoe and hadn't dared stop to get it?

Also, Poetry's little ditty was repeating itself in my mind:

*For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;  
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;  
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.*

I wasn't thinking of a lost horseshoe, though, but of a lost, left red shoe and the girl who had been wearing it.

I kept my eyes peeled in a circle of directions as we hurried along, looking and hoping to see a red dress with a girl in it. Whoever she was, did she need the kind of help two boys with work-and-play-hardened muscles could give?

Where was the other shoe, and why had this one been tossed away, if it had? I decided to wipe off the mud, using the gunnysack we'd brought along in the wagon for balling the tree.

The shoe, as I'd first decided, was almost new. "Hey!" I gasped to Poetry. "Look at the sole! It doesn't have any mud on it! Only on the side! She *wasn't* wearing it when it got left in the mud! It wasn't even on her foot!"

But Detective Thompson wasn't impressed. "Like I said," he called back over his shoulder, "it fell or was thrown from somewhere!"

Ahead of us I could see more light through the trees. That meant that soon we'd be through the swamp, into Old Man Paddler's woods, and on the way to his cabin and the stream behind his woodshed where the spruce tree would be waiting for us. In a little while, I started to think, we'd—

And that was as far as I got to think. At right that second, as plain as a white cloud in a clear blue sky, I heard a bloodcurdling scream, the kind a wildcat makes when it's hunting or maybe like a mountain lion makes. It was that loud.

"Wildcat!" I whispered to Poetry, who'd stopped stock-still so suddenly that I whammed into the wagon with my own shins, and we almost had another upset.

"Not a wildcat!" he corrected me. "They do their roaming and hunting in the morning and evening twilight. In the hot afternoons they sleep. Besides, last summer we killed the only wildcat there ever was in this part of the country. Remember?"

I remembered, all right, one of the most dangerous adventures we'd had in our whole lives. But right then I thought of something I'd not thought of for a long time. "She had two little kitten wildcats, didn't she? And we took them to the zoo in Memory City?"

"That's what I said," Poetry countered. "First, we killed the mother, and then we gave her babies away."

"Yeah," I came back, "but whoever heard of

a family of wildcats without there being a father as well as a mother! Old Stubtail's babies had to have a father!"

Already I was cringing at the idea, and my eyes were alert for a reddish brown fur coat with a wildcat in it. "There! There it is again!" I half whispered, half yelled to Poetry. This time the sound wasn't a scream, though. It was a wolflike cry that was half howl and half laugh with a little mournful wail all through it.

"It's a loon!" Poetry decided emphatically.

"But it can't be. We've never seen any loons around here. Only when we've been on camping trips in the northern lake country!"

But sounds such as the two bloodcurdling howls we'd just heard had to come from something or somebody. I wished Big Jim were with us with his rifle. Or Circus with his bow and arrow. Or even Little Jim, with his long walking stick, which he'd made himself and always carried. Or Dragonfly, who was good with his slingshot. Anybody, just so there would be more of us if we accidentally did run into a situation that would need the whole gang to solve it or to fight it out.

I was actually trembling inside as, with the red shoe in my hand, I hurried along after Poetry. I just knew there was something wrong somewhere. Somebody somewhere needed our help.

## 2

When we finally reached the old man's cabin, we found the door closed and locked. There was a shipping tag hanging by a string on the knob, the kind of tag people tie on sold furniture in a store or to something that's being sent by mail or express or freight.

We knocked first, as we always do when we visit anybody. That is one of the Sugar Creek Gang's courtesy rules: never open anybody's house door and walk in without knocking. That also was one of our family rules. Even when we are inside the house, we knock first on a closed door to find out if the person in the other room would rather have privacy. The only person in our family who goes into any room anytime she wants to, if we let her, is my three-year-old sister Charlotte Ann.

As I was saying, we knocked first on Old Man Paddler's front door. Then, when nobody answered the knock, Poetry tried several more times, while we listened for any sounds from the inside.

When there was still no answer and our ears didn't hear anything, Poetry complained, "I thought you said he told you he'd be here to show you which tree to dig. I got my shins

cracked on your wagon and rolled down the hill for nothing!”

By that time I was studying the shipping tag. “Here!” I cried excitedly. “There’s a note.” It was a note in the old man’s trembling scrawl.

I’m sorry not to be at home, boys, but early this morning I decided to take that trip to California I’ve been telling you about. The tree, as I told you last week, is behind the woodshed. I’ve tied a red ribbon on the one you’re to dig.

You’ll find the spade in the woodshed. I left the door open and unlocked. The latch is set so all you have to do is just shut it when you put the spade away, and it’ll lock itself.

The note was signed with the old man’s initials, “S.P.” which I knew meant Seneth Paddler, although the same letters could have meant Sarah Paddler if she had been alive.

She was buried in the very old grass-grown cemetery at the top of Bumblebee Hill. Their two boys were buried there, too, and someday the old man himself would be. In fact, his tombstone was already there and had his name on it and the date he was born. His death date won’t get chiseled on until he dies, which all the boys of the Sugar Creek Gang hope won’t be for a long time. In fact, we hope the kind, long-whiskered old man won’t ever die.

He'll have to, though. Everybody does, our minister says. Not wanting to won't make any difference, so everybody had better be ready.

Standing there now, reading the carefully scrawled note, I remembered something the old man had said to us the day he promised me the tree for Mom's birthday surprise. The whole gang was in his kitchen at the time. We had just finished a drink apiece of sassafras tea, which he makes for us every time we go up to see him.

On the oilcloth-covered kitchen table was part of the manuscript of a book he had been writing, which I could see he'd named "The Christian After Death." Beside the manuscript was an open Bible and quite a few other books, some open and some not. Several of them were like some books we had in our library at home, books called commentaries. My parents use them all week every week, studying their Sunday school lessons. Both Mom and Dad are teachers.

Little Jim swished down the last of his tea. Standing with his cup in his hand and his eyes focused on the book manuscript, he piped up in a mouselike voice and asked, "What do people do after . . . after . . ." He stopped and nodded toward the manuscript.

Everything was quiet in the house for what seemed several minutes. Then the old man lifted his head, and his snow-white hair, which had just had a shampoo and was silky and shining, was prettier than I'd ever seen it. He looked

out the window in the direction of the woodshed and beyond. Then he answered Little Jim.

“True believers in Christ keep right on living. Death for them, boys, is like being transplanted. Take that little spruce tree Bill’s giving his mother for her birthday. It’s not going to die. It’s just being moved. You dig it up here and set it out there. And it keeps on living.”

That was one of the prettiest things I’d ever heard anybody say. It flashed through my mind in a hurry while I was still standing reading the note on the shipping tag.

“What’s wrong?” Poetry interrupted my thoughts to ask. “You’ve got tears in your eyes!”

“Have I?” I answered and was surprised to notice that my eyes were stinging a little, the way they do when I get smoke in them.

In a few seconds we were on our way to the woodshed. There we found the door open, as the note said, and the spade leaning against the old man’s workbench. I noticed he had been building something or other, but he had all his tools put away in the places made for them on the wall above the bench. My mind’s eye took a quick picture of everything I saw, and seconds later I was outside.

The cute little two-foot-tall blue spruce was only a few feet from the noisy brook that flows behind the woodshed. It was a good thing the old man had tied the red ribbon on it, because there were about seven other small trees close by, and we could easily have picked the wrong one.



Right away we were digging, using the shovel we'd brought and the spade from the woodshed. I knew exactly how to transplant a small tree, since I'd read how in a book I'd borrowed from the Sugar Creek Library. A library is what my dad calls "a thinking boy's best friend."

"Not too close to the tree," I cautioned Poetry, "or you'll cut off some of the obliques." I felt proud of myself because I knew what obliques were.

He grunted a kind of lofty answer, saying, "I know. I read the book myself. First growing out from the taproot are the primary roots, then the secondaries, then the tertiaries. And from these there are thousands of obliques, and from the obliques, millions of capillaries as fine as hair and even finer root hairs by the billion and—"

"Stop! Don't tell me everything I already know!"

"One thing you don't know, though," he countered.

"What's that?"

"It's only through the billions of root hairs that the tree can drink. And I'm thirsty." With that, he tossed down his shovel and then was on his hands and knees beside the brook, drinking like a cow. While he was there, he spotted the red shoe I'd dropped nearby and said, "I wonder if it'll hold water and how much?"

But I quickly stopped him from using it for a drinking cup.

Poetry, his thirst satisfied, grunted himself to his feet and started quoting one of his many poems, one I happened to know myself.

“I chatter, chatter as I flow  
To join the brimming river;  
For men may come and men may go  
But I go on forever.”

“Tennyson,” I said. “Tennyson wrote it.”  
And he grunted back, “Yeah, Tennyson.”

The fast flowing brook beside us certainly didn't act as if it had a worry in the world. It tumbled cheerfully along on its way toward Sugar Creek, whose spring floods had been over for more than a month.

“I wish *I* could run around all day and not even have to get out of bed to do it,” Poetry remarked. Then he added, “But I guess a brook or a creek or a river is about the only thing in the world that can do that.”

That was an old joke I'd heard years ago when I was little.

Pretty soon we had a deep trench dug all the way around the tree at the end of its obliques. We were about ready to start balling the roots when I heard the old man's cabin door open and saw four boys come tumbling out, chattering, laughing, playing leapfrog, and whooping it up.

It was the rest of the gang: Big Jim, our fuzzy-mustached leader; Little Jim, the littlest one of us; Circus, our acrobat and the best boy

archer in the county; and last of all, spindle-legged Dragonfly, whose nose is allergic to more smells than anything. He also has the noisiest sneeze of any of us.

I stopped, straightened up with a shovelful of dirt in my shovel, and called, "How'd you get in the house with the door locked?"

"We came through the cave." Dragonfly sneezed, then added, "Big Jim has the keys. Old Man Paddler gave 'em to him on his way to town."

Big Jim held up a key ring to prove what Dragonfly had said was the truth and explained, "He stopped at our house, and my folks drove him to the bus station."

It certainly felt fine to have the rest of the gang with us. We needed a few extra muscles anyway to help ball the tree and especially to help lift it into the wagon, since the ball of dirt was going to be very heavy.

"We get to come up every other day to water the flowers and shrubs," Dragonfly said. He drew back with his sling and let go a small stone in the direction of the old man's spring, where there was a tin can standing on a rock shelf. His rock just barely missed the can.

"Let me show you how to do it," Circus said.

Carefully, Circus took aim with the bow and arrow he'd brought with him. The homemade arrow flew straight as a bullet, whammed into the tin cup, and sent it tumbling into the spring reservoir.

That's when I noticed the arrow had a long

string fastened to it, and the string had unrolled from what looked like a plastic drinking cup fastened to the bow. In a second, Circus was winding the string back onto the drinking cup, and the arrow followed along toward us on the other end.

Guessing I was curious about the plastic cup attached to the bow, Circus explained, "It's a homemade reel for bow-fishing. This is spawning season for carp and suckers, and I'm going to shoot a few for our hogs. You guys see any in the muskrat pond?"

We hadn't, but we had seen something else—a girl's red leather slip-on shoe. I was about to tell Circus and the rest of the gang but didn't even get started, because Circus was so proud of his homemade bow-fishing outfit that he cut in on me.

Holding up his outfit for us to study, he explained, "First, you take a plastic cup like this, stick a heated knife blade clear through it near the bottom, and then you use the slits to strap the cup onto the bow. Like this, see?"

It was hard to "see" when I wanted to talk myself.

"All you have to do," he said proudly, "is run the end of a kite string through the screw eye here at the nock and along the length of the arrow to the arrowhead. You fasten it, and you're ready for business. When you've stalked a carp or a school of 'em, you just take aim, shoot, and *wham!* you've got a fish!"

When he finished, I still had only a foggy

idea of how he'd made his outfit. I did see that he'd driven a slender nail through one of his arrows just above the point, driving it at a sharp angle so that, where the nail's pointed end came through, it made a barb for fastening the string.

Each one of the four had brought something with him: Circus, his bow-fishing outfit; Little Jim, his walking stick; Big Jim, Old Man Paddler's ring of keys; and Dragonfly, his sling-shot.

Dragonfly had also brought something else. What it was I discovered a little later when I saw him starting to play with a red shoe, tossing it up and catching it as it came down!

"Hey!" I exclaimed to that little rascal. "That's a clue to a kidnapping or something! I found it back in the swamp at the edge of the pond!"

"You did not!" he said saucily and kept on tossing up the shoe and catching it as it came down. "I found it myself at the mouth of the cave!"

I looked in my wagon, where I'd put the red leather slip-on shoe Poetry and I had found, and what to my wondering eyes should appear but the shoe itself, still there. Dragonfly had a *right* shoe instead of a left.

"Where'd you say you found it?" I asked him.

That's when he spied the shoe in the wagon and made a dive for it. "I wondered where the mate was!" he cried happily. "Now I've got a

whole pair!” He plopped himself down beside Tennyson’s brook, took off his sneakers, and in a flash was up and strutting around in the red shoes.

“Those are *girl’s* shoes!” Poetry scoffed. “You want to look like a girl?”

Dragonfly stopped, glanced in the direction of the afternoon sun, got a messed-up expression on his face, and sneezed a long sneeze that could have been heard almost as far away as the swamp.

For a second I’d forgotten what Poetry and I came up there to do. My mind was all tangled up in the mystery again. Now we had *two* lost-and-found shoes!

Dragonfly’s noisy sneeze must have given Circus an idea. Right away he flapped his arms at his sides the way our old red rooster flaps his wings before he crows. Then he cupped his hands to his lips to make a megaphone out of them, threw back his head, and let out toward the sky a bloodcurdling scream like a wildcat’s or a mountain lion’s. It also sounded like a half-scared-to-death woman in danger of her life. It was the same sound Poetry and I had heard when we were in the swamp.

Before I could gather my scattered thoughts, Circus cut loose with another high-pitched cry, this time like the mournful wail of a northern lakes loon.

It certainly was deflating. It was like having a blowout and losing all the air in a tire on the car you are riding in to have the hysterical cries

I'd been afraid of back near the muskrat pond turn out to be just one of the gang mimicking a wildcat and a loon. Circus had probably made the sounds just before they went into the cave to go to Old Man Paddler's cabin the back way.

Well, it took some of the danger out of our mystery, but it didn't solve it. We still had a pair of girl's red shoes on our hands. Or feet.

And Dragonfly was still strutting around in them near Tennyson's brook. I noticed he was walking with a limp.

"What's the matter?" Little Jim asked him. "One shoe got a nail in it?"

The question started Poetry in again.

"For want of a nail, the shoe was lost,  
For want of a shoe—"

That was as far as he quoted before Dragonfly fired back at Little Jim, "One of them's too short. Feels like there's something stuffed in the toe."

With that, he plopped himself down on the grass again, whisked off the left shoe, and took out of its toe a folded piece of paper, which he gave an over-the-shoulder toss toward the brook. It landed in a riffle and was whisked away downstream, dancing over the covered rocks and around the uncovered ones as if in a hurry to get as far away from us as possible.

"You goof!" Poetry cried at Dragonfly and started racing after the wad of paper. "That might have been a clue!"

Even before Poetry finished saying that, I was scooting downstream after it myself. But Circus, faster than either Poetry or me, swished past us and in a flash caught up with the clue or whatever it was. He reached out and scooped it up.